

Holy Week 2022 Lecture Notes

Overall theme contrasting historical reality of the events of Holy Week with the hero narratives created by the Gospels.

Historical Reality

What is the historical reality of the events of the Passion narrative? How can we establish this reality? The documents of the Second Testament are our main source. Through a careful interpretation they can give us some critical clues and insights to what happened, as well as why the Gospels tell their versions of what happened.

Knowing the historical context of the Roman Empire and its methods of controlling its subjects in this region.

Historical documents that although may not mention these specific events of the Passion narrative can help us understand the actions of some of the people involved.

The earliest pieces of information we have about any of the events of Holy Week comes from Paul's Letters, written probably about 30 years after the events of the Passion.

Mark is the first Gospel account written probably about 35 years after the Passion. There is a theory based on the inclusion and interpretation of Mark 14:51-52 that Mark may be a possible eyewitness to

some of the events of Holy Week, but it is not a commonly accepted theory.

There is no indication that any of the other Gospel writers were eyewitnesses. Instead, they relied upon Mark and other sources to tell their version of the story.

Paul is our first written source.

In his letters he frequently and specifically that Jesus was crucified and in his first Letter to the Corinthians he gives details about the last meal Jesus shared with his companions and that he was betrayed on that night.

Mark as a historical source.

When read with an understanding of the historical context as well as the style of Mark's writing, there are some historical facts in his account of Holy Week. Jesus did something to attract the attention of Rome and its collaborators.

According to the Gospels when Jesus entered the city, he did so in a way that would get the attention of the authorities.

He engaged in an act of symbolic violence to show the failure of the present religious institution that was the Temple cult.

Neither of these actions directly threatened Rome's control over the region. Yet they were an act of resistance that needed to be crushed, and Jesus was not someone important enough to treat with kid's gloves.

Indeed, despite the Gospel accounts, Pontius Pilate may have been looking for someone to use as a public example of the violence Rome would inflict on those who would dare to attempt to resist Rome.

Jewish authorities may have co-operated with Rome. Not so much because they saw Jesus as a threat, but more they feared that Rome would unleash more violence on the people of Jerusalem, and once more Jesus wasn't important to warrant any special attention that might save his life.

As a declared threat to the Roman peace, and as a nobody as far as the authorities were concerned, at some point Jesus would be arrested, prosecuted and executed by the Romans. More and likely one of Pilate's subordinates would have supervised this process.

We know it was a Roman affair, because of the method of execution and the charges laid against Jesus that he calling himself the 'King of the Jews'. By using this charge and crucifying Jesus, Rome made its point, this is what happens to anyone who forgets that Rome, not their God, is in charge.

There is no record of the Romans releasing a prisoner during Passover, they certainly wouldn't have released a violent insurgent such as Barabbas.

The evolution of the heroic narrative in the Gospels.
Looking at particular moments.

The crowd, the leaders and Barabbas
The Gospel of Mark 14:6-15

The Gospel of Matthew 27:15-25

The Gospel of Luke 23:13-25

The Gospel of John 18:38-40

In Mark we have the crowd wanting Barabbas instead of Jesus.

What is the purpose of this story?

Is Mark making a point about humanity's failure to grasp the meaning of Jesus as the Messiah? Barabbas is a man of action, was he someone who fought against the Romans, a more traditional vision of the Messiah?

Matthew uses the story and takes it to a darker place where it becomes a foundational text for Christian anti-Judaism. Here the crowd is led by the Jewish leadership to demand that Jesus be crucified, even willing to accept a blood curse in doing so.

What is Matthew's aim?

Matthew writes in the midst of deep divisions within the Jewish community of their time in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt. Most reject Jesus as the Messiah, Matthew speaks for those who proclaim Jesus is the Messiah. So Matthew makes this rejection part of his narrative of the trial of Jesus, with its possible consequences.

Luke shows the political machinations behind the decision as the various groups try to find ways not to be responsible for the death of Jesus.

One common theme is Pontius Pilate convinced that Jesus is innocent and trying to find a way not to have him executed.

Pontius Pilate's own record, in the Gospels and other historical texts, makes it clear that this is highly unlikely. Pilate was an official known for relying upon violence to suppress any opposition to Rome. He had already been responsible for the death of many people whose only crime was to peacefully oppose Rome. That Pilate would waste time and political capital in trying to keep Jesus alive makes no sense.

What does make sense is why the later Gospel writers would 'rewrite' the character of Pontius Pilate.

The future of the Christian movement was with Rome, yet it was a faith whose leader had been executed by Rome. As a Roman could you follow the Son of God who had been executed as a threat to the Pax Romana, the Roman peace?

Maybe it wasn't really Rome's fault, maybe Pontius Pilate had been manipulated by more shadowy forces, the Jewish leadership to execute Jesus.

So the circle is squared. Although Jesus was executed as a process of Roman law enforcement, Rome was not really responsible.

This is not a historical fact, Pilate's own record as well as the details of the process clearly show Rome's responsibility, but it was an awkward reality for the emerging Christian faith that should be hidden by a different narrative.

The scene in the Garden before Jesus' arrest
The Gospel of Mark 14:32-42

The Gospel of Matthew 26:36-46

The Gospel of Luke 22:39-46

The Gospel of John doesn't have this specific scene, just a final sermon from Jesus with no indication of his struggles at this moment.

In both Mark and Matthew we witness the full humanity of Jesus struggling with the reality of this moment. He faces death, a terrible death and he personally wants to avoid this fate.

In Luke we have the presence of angels and more of a sense of melodrama with Jesus' reactions to this moment, I guess to show more of the pathos of this moment.

The Last Words of Jesus

The Gospel of Mark 15:34 and the Gospel of Matthew 27:46

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Gospel of Luke 23:46

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

The Gospel of John 19:30

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.